

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Ethel White (b. 1949) hails from Bruce, Mississippi and has lived in Milwaukee since 1969. A professionally trained tailor and seamstress, she brings years of expert sewing to her quilting. Ethel is largely self-taught in quilting, learning from magazines, shows on public television, and quilts at expos. She recently purchased her first long arm quilting machine. She was inspired to start quilting by the Gee's Bend Quilters of Alabama.

Ethel describes her design approach in this way: "I look for a source of visual inspiration, interpret the images through meticulous appliqué, frame the images without overpowering them, and finally give the back of the quilt a distinctive look of its own whenever possible." She uses contemporary imported African fabrics in her quilts.

Ethel grew up watching her mother making quilts with other women in their small town. "I had little knowledge of our culture, only from my mother and how she pieced her blocks together on Montgomery Ward Catalogue paper as a foundation." She learned the cultural importance of the art from her mother. "Quilting together has been a major way for women to socialize in African American culture. Quilting, like hair braiding, is a tradition of bonding among women and gift giving to family members. Handing down quilts from generation to generation is a source of pride for families."

Ethel maintains that strong bond with other quilters in Milwaukee. She belongs to three quilt groups: the Ronald McDonald House McQuilters, the Ujaama Quilters, and the Northshore Quilters Guild. Every week she mentors senior citizens and retirees in quilting at the McGovern Park Pavillion in Milwaukee's Far North neighborhood.

Ethel and her apprenticeship Pinkie Williams-Wesley met in McGovern Park for their sessions, focusing on machine appliqué using the satin stitch. One of Ethel's favorite techniques, she explains, "Appliqué quilts allow for beautiful representations of images and scenes that convey powerful messages." The project Ethel chose for her apprentice was "Proverbs Ch. 31: And She Works Willingly with her Hands," a quilt of 17 blocks showing women engaged in different hand-craft activities. They displayed the quilt at the Park at the end of the apprenticeship.

For Pinkie, the apprenticeship helped her to discover "new methods for embellishing my heritage." It was a learning experience for Ethel too: "I always share ideas and techniques with other quilters but this really helped me to see my own potential as a teacher."